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ABSTRACT

Three members of the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association express their positions about minimum competency standards. Kenneth Goodman presents a humanitarian, idealistic view of the controversy and questions the effectiveness of legislative mandates. Roger Farr expresses concern that limitations of testing procedures might make it impossible to guarantee that graduates of our schools will be able to compete and succeed in society. Jack Cassidy suggests ten guidelines to use in implementing those minimum competency requirements that have been mandated. (Author/CTM)

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MINIMUM COMPETENCY STANDARDS

Three points of view

The three short position papers in this pamphle are the result of periodic and lengthy discussions at meetings of the Board of Directors of the International Reading Association. Because the pros and cons of minimum competency standards have been argued all over North America for many months, the IRA Board decided to set aside a special time during which the Board members would discuss the various facets of this timely—and lively—issue. Thus, at a meeting in late January 1978, the Board members reviewed and debated many aspects of minimum competency standards for more than an hour and a half.

As the discussion on January 27 drew to a close, Dr. Robert Ruddell pointed out that the comments had focused largely on three points of view and that the leading exponents of those views were Dr. Kenneth Goodman, Dr. Roger Farr, and Dr. Jack Cassidy. It was the consensus of the Board that these three of its members should prepare short statements of the positions they had been asserting during the discussion.

Because Dr. Goodman is not a stranger to many thousands of IRA members, it should not surprise them that he supports a humanitarian, idealistic view of minimum competency standards; he questions the morality of the basic procedures involved. Writing from a well-recognized background in evaluation and measurement, Dr. Farr expresses concern over the limitations of testing procedures prescribed to determine whether the competency levels have been attained. Dr. Cassidy, perhaps because he is currently most closely tied with a public school system, accepts minimum competency programs as a "fact of life" and then proceeds to consider how professional educators can live with them.

In arranging for the publication of the position statements of Goodman, Farr and Cassidy, the Board of Directors of IRA is not offering these views as official positions of the Association, partly because the Board does not presume to know what the consensus of IRA members would be and also because there is enough philosophical disagreement on some points so that endorsement of the divergent views would be illogical. Nevertheless, it is likely that minimum competency standards and programs will pose many large-scale problems for North American educators for several years to come. The Board of Directors of the International Reading Association hopes that these expressions by Goodman, Farr and Cassidy will stimulate IRA members, and other educators, to develop their own points of view regarding this serious educational trend. Even more, the Board members hope that Association members, as well as local, provincial and state councils, will "get into the act" when decisions are being made about minimum competency standards, instead of sitting idly by while governmental agencies make judgments that have tremendous influence on the educational opportunities of young learners.

William Eller

Minimum Competencies: A Moral View

Kenneth Goodman

"I've got a problem" said the student. "I don't read very well. I think my writing is awful. I'm not too good at arithmetic either. I'm going to graduate from high school soon. Can anyone help me?"

"I know you've got a problem" said the teacher. "I've got one, too. I've done the best I could to teach you. But you just haven't achieved very much. And you're not the only one. I wish someone would help me."

"I wish I could help you with your problem," said the administrator. "I've got one, too. The low achievement in your class is reflecting badly on me. I've provided you with materials, remedial specialists, inservice education but it hasn't helped. I wish someone could help me solve this problem."

"We'll help," said the State Legislature.

"Great," said the student.

"Marvelous," said the teacher.

"I'm saved," said the administrator.

"We'll solve the problem," said the legislature. "We'll make sure that no student ever graduates from high school without minimum competencies in the basics. There'll be no illiterates graduating from our schools."

"Terrific!" said the student. "How will you make sure I get those minimum competencies?"

"We'll make the administrator accountable," said the legislature.

"Accountable!" said the administrator.

"From now on you must test all graduating seniors. If they can't pass the basics at tenth grade level we won't let you give them high school diplomas. And you may not promote anyone from the ninth grade who scores below sixth grade in the basics," said the legislature.

"Did you hear that?" said the administrator to the teacher. "I'm holding you accountable for getting those students ready for the test."

"But how will I do that?" said the teacher to the administrator. "I've picked up some new ideas from my inservice classes. Shall we try them?"

"Nothing of the sort" said the administrator to the teacher. "Too much is at stake here. This is no time to try new ideas. Forget the frills, too. We've got work to do."

"Frills?" said the teacher. "What do you mean by frills?"

"Anything that's not on the test," said the administrator. "Back to basics," he said, "and that's an order."

"Now, then," said the teacher to the student, "let's get at your problem. Put your book away, we've got some exercises to do."

"I think I've got two problems now," said the student.

This modern parable illustrates the poverty of logic behind the attempt to solve fundamental educational problems through legislatively mandated minimum competencies. In such attempts competency is equated with test performance, the curriculum is narrowed and totally dominated by the tests, latitude for professional judgment by administrators and teachers is minimized, innovation and application of new insights and methodology are made impossible, and the student is doubly punished for the failure of the whole educational system. And in all this there is no seeking of causes, no concern for analyzing problems, no applications of research or theory, no new solutions.

This is not to say that the effort is not a sincere one. Surely the advocates of mandated minimum competencies have the best interests of students as their goals. But such mandates are nonetheless unfortunate. They aggravate the problem, placing unbearable pressure on teaching and learning while offering no positive help.

The effectiveness of minimum competency testing depends on the truth of some or all of five propositions:

1) Failure to achieve is due to a lack of school standards.
2) Student failure is largely the result of lack of teacher concern for student success, or teacher mediocrity or both.
3) Solutions for teaching-learning problems are built into current, traditional materials and methods.
4) Test performance is the same as competence; furthermore, existing tests can be used for accurate individual assessment and prediction.
5) If students are required to succeed they will.

None of these propositions, however, is true. The whole attempt to help learners through mandated minimum competencies turns into an attempt to blame someone for the failure of the system.

It's time for professional educators to reject such attempts as destructive and unsuccessful and to put the focus back where it belongs—on seeking real substantive solutions to real problems.

We must study the students who are not succeeding, not just test them. We must examine curricula, methodology, theory and classroom practice, not just students. We must build objectives relevant to learners and consistent with scholarship, not simply mandate standards.

In the field of reading this all means seeing the problems of literacy in the context of what we know about the uses and learning of language. It means finding linguistic strength even in the system's losers. It means helping reading teachers to be more competent, not treating them as untrustworthy incompetents. And it means taking the lid off the pressure cooker of mandated minimum competencies before it blows off.

The Potential Misuse of Tests

Roger Farr

Two fundamental questions need to be raised before anyone makes a massive commitment to testing for minimum competencies.

1. Is the general frustration about the success or lack of success in present school programs really justified?

2. Will testing for minimum competencies bring an end to that frustration? Will it guarantee that graduates of our schools are able to compete and succeed in society?

In answering either question, we must recognize the potential for misinterpreting and misusing test results.

Scores on tests given to college-bound students declined markedly for twenty years up to about 1975, when they began to level off.

There has at the same time been a general belief that children at all levels of schooling are not performing as well on tests that measure basic skills as did children in years past. What are the facts?

The Scholastic Aptitude Tests are designed to predict how well some high school juniors and seniors will do in college. The SAT is not designed to measure achievement in basic skills, nor is it designed to measure children at all levels. It is intended to measure the abilities only of those high school students who are thinking of going to college.

Several panels have examined possible causes for drops in scores on such tests as the SAT. One of the causes they have suggested for declining scores is that the students taking the SAT now include more who are less academically inclined than most of the students who took the tests twenty or twenty-five years ago.

In tests other than the SAT, especially those designed for use at lower grade levels, it is extremely difficult to compare scores from test to test and from year to year. Attempts to make such comparisons have given us mixed results. They definitely do not indicate that students today are poorer achievers than students twenty years ago. For example, studies show that students now in the lower grades seem to be reading as well as or better than children who were in the same grades in previous decades.

A reasonable conclusion from an examination of the "declining test scores" is that much more research is needed before embarking on a major commitment with the potential of minimum competency testing. Such research could determine if minimum competency testing can guarantee that our schools will effectively prepare our children to succeed in society. Can such tests measure what is actually being taught? Can a single test, or even a series of tests, determine the effectiveness of twelve years of instruction?

The greatest problems in trying to devise tests that will measure minimum competencies are those that have long been recognized and discussed by people who specialize in testing and measurement. In the introduction to a book published more than ten years ago, Anastasi (1966) viewed some of the problems with the use of tests at that time. Her

observations are as relevant in 1978 as they were in 1966.

> The Twenty-Fifth Anniversary of the Invitational Conference comes at a time when testing is the target for public attack from several angles. Despite the cautions and reservations of psychometricians, the rapid expansion of testing in many practical contexts has led to certain difficulties. In this period of over-popularization, tests have been widely misunderstood, misused, and misinterpreted. As a result, the public has come to have misgivings about testing in general. Exploitation of these feelings by sensational writers has in turn aroused more vigorous public protests, as illustrated by legislative proposals to curb testing. (p. 15)

The anti-testing attitudes that Anastasi noted were no more justified in the mid-1960s than is the current misplaced faith in testing for minimum competencies. In their rush to implement testing for minimum competencies, schools and state legislatures are inviting misuse of tests.

The first major pitfall in many proposals for minimum competency testing lies in the fact that no single test could possibly be valid for deciding as important and as broad a question as a student's fitness for graduation from high school. To rely on only one test is to disregard a student's entire educational history, including teachers' judgments as well as the student's past academic performance.

What we need is not one test, but a variety of assessments, gathered at many points in a student's life, under various conditions, assessing numerous abilities in different ways.

The second potential misuse of testing for minimum competencies arises in the inevitable intimidation of such testing. Educators will design curricula primarily to improve test scores rather than to prepare citizens to cope with society's needs and demands.

School programs, after all, should be built from what it is necessary for students to know or be able to do. Only after programs are developed should a test be devised to determine which students might profit from the program.

Most proposals for the testing of minimum competencies turn the process around. They begin with a test, then follow with a charge to the educational establishment to develop a

program for those who fail the test. We must guard against letting tests dictate the contents of programs.

To use measurement properly as an aid to planning instruction, Tyler (1951) listed four conditions:

> First, it is essential that the outcomes selected for testing should be the important objectives of the instructional program. In the second place, it is essential that achievement testing be planned and developed as an integral part of the program of curriculum and instruction. A third condition for realizing the potential contributions of measurement to instruction is that the achievement testing program be guided and controlled by those responsible for the guidance and control of the instructional program. A fourth condition . . . is to encourage teachers to take part in the construction of all types of task, since many standard tests and teacher-made testing instruments constructed for one school system are not applicable without adaptation to the curriculum of another school system. (pp. 66-67)

It is certain that concerns about competency testing are based primarily on the likelihood that the tests will be misused.

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Minimum Competency Programs—How?

Jack Cassidy

Like many other new ideas in education, establishing minimum competencies in schools around the country can have both good and bad effects. Minimum competencies are like basal readers, standardized testing, phonics or any other practice or approach in education: they can benefit students, or they can work against students, depending on how they are drawn up and used.

The effect of minimum competencies will certainly be negative if they lead only to establishing a program of testing which is then followed simply by retaining or promoting students, grade by grade.

On the other hand, if a set of minimum competencies is carefully designed and implemented with due consideration of the many factors that influence teaching, learning and testing, the effect could be very positive for all concerned—teachers, the general public and its legislators, and, most of all, students.

Legislators and school boards in virtually every state have mandated some requirements that can be called minimum competencies. It is therefore essential that educators in public schools come up with reasonable plans for implementing those mandates.

Here are ten guidelines that should be followed in developing any minimum competency program.

Multilevel Competencies. Standards of minimum competency should be developed for more than just the exit level—that is, the level that determines graduation from high school. Minimum competencies should be described at primary, intermediate, middle school, and junior high school levels as well as at the senior high school level. It is simply unfair for students to have completed most of their schooling, then suddenly be judged as incompetent.

Insurance of Due Process. An individual student's competency or lack of it should not be the sole basis for deciding whether or not that

student is to be promoted. Rather, further instruction of that student should be based on what teachers have learned, through testing for minimum competency, about the student's areas of competency and areas of weakness. Determining whether or not a student should be retained in a particular grade for a second year should be a joint effort of parents and school officials and perhaps even the student.

Adequate Remediation. Funds should be provided for helping those students who fail to achieve standards of minimum competency. No student should become the "fall guy" in an attempt to make the educational system one that is accountable for its successes and failures. Even such an advocate of competency-based instruction and mastery learning as Benjamin Bloom (1976) recognizes that in order for mastery to take place some form of extra-class instruction is usually needed for some students.

Flexibility of Time. If tests are developed to assess competence at the exit level, students who do not achieve competence on the first trial should be given further opportunities. Time, instruction, and reinforcement are all variables which influence mastery. All students should not have to achieve mastery at the same time.

Minimum Standards. Competencies should be focused on base level skills necessary for everyone to achieve. At the same time, it should not be assumed that these skills constitute the whole curriculum. Indeed, for most students they will constitute only a very small part of the curriculum.

Certificates of Competence. Consideration should be given to alternatives to the traditional high school diploma. Instead, perhaps students should receive a certificate of competence delineating the specific skills they have mastered. Students who have mastered all the requisite skills should be awarded a general certificate of competence.

Uniformity of Standards. Consideration should have some degree of uniformity from district to district and state to state. Certainly, it would be grossly unfair to judge a student who happens to reside in one school district incompetent, while in a neighboring similar school district the same student might be judged competent. Perhaps implementation of competencies at the state level would be the most feasible alternative.

Adequate Performance Indicators. Attempts should be made to develop and utilize assessment instruments that are both valid and reliable. While it is true that informal teacher-constructed assessments might be used, more carefully structured means should also be used.

Dissemination of Standards. Competencies and means to teach these competencies should be disseminated to all teachers. Curriculum guides and teaching practices should emphasize these competencies for students who have not yet achieved mastery. Schools leave themselves open to possible law suits if there is no evidence that competencies have been taught. Parents and students should also be aware of exactly what the basic competencies are.

Relevance. Competencies that are developed should be relevant to functioning in adult society. Reading a job application certainly has more relevance than knowing the rules of syllabication.

These ten guidelines do not cover all contingencies that arise in the development and implementation of minimum competencies. However, they do provide some basic standards which those in the reading field can use in constructing and instituting a competency-based program.

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Note: Portions of this statement appeared in the *Journal of Reading* article mentioned in the references.

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